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(54) Title: SURFACE TREATMENT OF CARBON MICROFIBERS

(57) Abstract

A method of oxidizing the surface of carbon microfibers that includes contacting the microfibers with an oxidizing agent that includes sulfuric acid and potassium chlorate under reaction conditions sufficient to oxidize the surface. The invention also features a method of decreasing the length of carbon microfibers that includes contacting the microfibers with an oxidizing agent under reaction conditions sufficient to decrease the length.

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SURFACE TREATMENT OF CARBON MICROFIBERS

Background of the Invention

This invention relates to modifying the surface of carbon microfibers.

Carbon microfibers (i.e. fibers having very small diameters, typically less than 1 micron) are known. Microfibers having diameters less than 0.5 micron are often referred to as fibrils. Examples of such microfibers and methods for preparing them are described in Tennent, U.S. Pat. No. 4,663,230 ("Carbon Fibrils, Method for Producing Same and Compositions Containing Same"), Tennent et al., U.S.S.N. 871,676 filed June 6, 1986 ("Novel Carbon Fibrils, Method for Producing Same and Compositions Containing Same"), Tennent et al., U.S.S.N. 871,675 filed June 6, 1986 ("Novel Carbon Fibrils, Method for Producing Same and Encapsulated Catalyst"), Snyder et al., U.S.S.N. 149,573 filed January 28, 1988 ("Carbon Fibrils"), and Mandeville et al., U.S.S.N. 285,817 filed December 16, 1988 ("Fibrils"), all of which are assigned to the same assignee as the present application and are hereby incorporated by reference.

Summary of the Invention

In a first aspect, the invention features a method of oxidizing the surface of carbon microfibers that includes contacting the microfibers with an oxidizing agent that includes sulfuric acid (H_2SO_4) and potassium chlorate ($KClO_3$) under reaction conditions (e.g., time, temperature, and pressure) sufficient to oxidize the surface.

In a second aspect, the invention features a method of decreasing the length of carbon microfibers that includes contacting the microfibers with an oxidizing agent under reaction conditions (e.g., time, temperature, and pressure) sufficient to decrease the length by chopping the microfibers. Preferably, the oxidizing agent includes sulfuric acid and potassium chlorate.

In preferred embodiments, the oxidizing agent is in the liquid phase. The microfibers preferably have diameters no greater than 1 micron (more preferably no greater than 0.1 micron). Even more preferred are microfibers having diameters between 3.5 and 75 nanometers, inclusive. Particularly preferred are microfibers that are tubes having graphitic layers that are substantially parallel to the microfiber axis. One aspect of substantial parallelism is that the projection of the graphite layers on the microfiber axis extends for a relatively long distance in terms of the external diameter of the microfiber (e.g., at least two microfiber diameters, preferably at least five diameters), as described in Snyder et al., U.S.S.N. 149,573. These microfibers preferably are also free of a continuous thermal carbon overcoat (i.e. pyrolytically deposited carbon resulting from thermal cracking of the gas feed used to prepare the microfibers).

The microfibers prepared according to the above-described process may be incorporated in a matrix. Preferably, the matrix is an organic polymer (e.g., a thermoset resin such as epoxy, bismaleimide, polyimide, or polyester resin; a thermoplastic resin; a reaction injection molded resin; or an elastomer such as natural rubber, styrene-butadiene rubber, or cis-1,4-polybutadiene), an inorganic polymer (e.g., a polymeric inorganic oxide such as glass), a metal (e.g., lead or copper), or a ceramic material (e.g., Portland cement). The microfibers may also form an adsorbent or a polymerization initiator.

The invention also features a volume of carbon fibrils that includes a multiplicity of fibrils having a morphology consisting of tubes that are free of a continuous thermal carbon overcoat and have graphitic layers that are substantially parallel to the fibril axis, the outer surface of the graphitic layers having bonded thereto a plurality of oxygen-containing groups (e.g., a carbonyl, carboxylic acid, carboxylic acid ester, epoxy, vinyl ester, hydroxy, alkoxy, isocyanate, or amide group), or derivatives thereof (e.g., a sulfhydryl, amino, or imino group).

The invention provides a simple and effective method for introducing, through an oxidation reaction, a wide variety of functional groups onto the surface of microfibers. Moreover, the treatment does not leave heavy metal residues on the surface of the microfibers. The invention also effectiv ly reduces microfiber length by "chopping up" the microfibers. Reducing the length aids in decreasing microfiber entanglement, thereby improving the tractability and dispersibility of the microfibers, two properties which are desirable in composite fabrication.

Other features and advantages of the invention will be apparent from the following description of the preferred embodiments thereof, and from the claims.

Description of the Preferred Embodiments

Preferred microfibers for the oxidation treatment are carbon fibrils having small diameters (preferably between 3.5 and 75 nanometers) and graphitic layers that are substantially parallel to the fibril axis that are also substantially free of a continuous thermal carbon overcoat, as described in Tennent, U.S. Pat. No. 4,663,230; Tennent et al., U.S.S.N. 871,675; Tennent et al., U.S.S.N. 871,676, Snyder et al., U.S.S.N. 149,573, and Mandeville et al., U.S.S.N. 285,817. These

fibrils are prepared as described in the aforementioned patent and patent applications.

In general, the fibrils are oxidized by contacting them with a solution of potassium chlorate dissolved in concentrated sulfuric acid. The treatment is conducted at room temperature in air. The initial oxidation reaction creates oxygen-containing functional groups on the surface of the fibrils. Continued exposure to the oxidizing solution cleaves the fibrils, thereby reducing fibril length.

Example

1 g of potassium chlorate was dissolved in 50 ml of concentrated sulfuric acid and added slowly to approximately 1-2 g of the above-described carbon fibrils. The oxidation reaction was then allowed to proceed in air for 30 min. Upon stirring, fibrils became suspended in the acidic medium, resulting in a black, gelatinous suspension. Close examination of a more dilute suspension revealed that the fibrils were not uniformly distributed but instead remained associated in clumps. At the end of the reaction, the fibrils were collect d on a medium porosity (about 5 μm) frit and washed with about 500 ml each of deionized water (until the filtrate had a ph of about 7) and methanol. Following filtration, all of the fibrils appeared to be retained on the frit. The fibrils were then dried first in a Schlenk tube at 70°C under vacuum (50 mtorr) and then at 180°C under flowing nitrogen.

The above procedure was repeated except that the oxidation reaction was allowed to proceed for 24 hours. Following filtration, the filtrate was slightly dark and cloudy, indicating the presence of small particles. Filtration through a 0.22 μm Millipore filter resulted in removal of the particles, indicating an effective length between 5 and 0.2 μm. Thus, this second reaction resulted in chopped-up fibrils having reduced lengths.

Samples from both reactions were then analyzed for carbon and oxygen content to reveal the presence of oxygen-containing groups using XPS spectroscopy. The results, shown in Table I, below, indicate that the oxidation reaction introduces a significant change in the atomic composition. No residual sulfur, chlorine, or potassium was observed. Moreover, a control reaction using only sulfuric acid resulted in no significant change in the atomic composition.

Table I

Sample	% Carbon	% Oxygen
Pre-oxidation	98.4	1.6
Oxidized 30 min.	91.9	8.1
Oxidized 24 h.	90.7	9.3
H_2SO_4, 30 min.	98.1	1.9

Other embodiments are within the following claims.

Claims

1. A method of oxidizing the surface of carbon microfibers comprising contacting said microfibers with an oxidizing agent that includes sulfuric acid and potassium chlorate under reaction conditions sufficient to oxidize said surface.

2. A method of decreasing the length of carbon microfibers comprising contacting said microfibers with an oxidizing agent under reaction conditions sufficient to decrease said length by chopping said microfibers.

3. The method of claim 2 wherein said oxidizing agent comprises sulfuric acid and potassium chlorate.

4. The method of claim 1 or 2 wherein said oxidizing agent is in the liquid phase.

5. The method of claim 1 or 2 wherein the diameter of said microfibers is no greater than 1 micron.

6. The method of claim 1 or 2 wherein the diameter of said microfibers is no greater than 0.1 micron.

7. The method of claim 1 or 2 wherein the diameter of said microfibers in between 3.5 and 75 nanometers, inclusive.

8. The method of claim 1 or 2 wherein said microfibers comprise tubes having graphitic layers that are substantially parallel to the microfiber axis.

9. The method of claim 8 wherein said microfibers are substantially free of a continuous thermal carbon overcoat.

10. A volume of carbon microfibers prepared according to the method of claim 1 or 2.

11. A composite comprising the microfiber volume of claim 10 in a matrix.

12. The composite of claim 11 wherein said matrix comprises an organic polymer.

13. The composite of claim 11 wherein said matrix comprises an inorganic polymer.

14. The composite of claim 11 wherein said matrix comprises a metal.

15. The composite of claim 11 wherein said matrix comprises a ceramic material.

16. The composite of claim 11 wherein said matrix comprises an elastomer.

17. The microfiber volume of claim 10 wherein said volume forms an adsorbent.

18. The microfiber volume of claim 10 wherein said volume forms a polymerization initiator.

19. A volume of carbon fibrils comprising a multiplicity of fibrils having a morphology consisting of tubes that are free of a continuous thermal carbon overcoat and have graphitic layers that are substantially parallel to the fibril axis,

the outer surface of said graphitic layers having bonded thereto a plurality of oxygen-containing groups, or derivatives thereof.

INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

International Application No. PCT/US90/02667

I. CLASSIFICATION OF SUBJECT MATTER (if several classification symbols apply, indicate all) [6]

According to International Patent Classification (IPC) or to both National Classification and IPC

INT. CL.5: B32B 9/00
U.S. CL. 427/215, 255.3; 428/367, 376, 398, 408

II. FIELDS SEARCHED

Minimum Documentation Searched [7]

Classification System	Classification Symbols
U.S.	427/215, 255.3; 428/367, 376, 398, 408

Documentation Searched other than Minimum Documentation to the Extent that such Documents are Included in the Fields Searched [8]

III. DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT [9]

Category *	Citation of Document, [11] with indication, where appropriate, of the relevant passages [12]	Relevant to Claim No. [13]
A	US, A, 4,663,230 (TENNENT) 05 MAY 1987	1-19

* Special categories of cited documents: [10]

"A" document defining the general state of the art which is not considered to be of particular relevance

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IV. CERTIFICATION

Date of the Actual Completion of the International Search	Date of Mailing of this International Search Report
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